

## A BRIEF SOCIO-LINGUISTIC SURVEY OF ZHOUQU TIBETAN

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief sketch of the socio-linguistic situation of Zhouqu Tibetan, a unique Tibetic variety spoken in Gansu Province, China. The authors used participatory methods to investigate questions of language vitality, domains of language use, language attitudes, and dialectal variation. The results show that: (1) Zhouqu Tibetan is used in all language domains; (2) locals see their language as an integral part of their identity even though they acknowledge that Chinese language proficiency is necessary for employment, education, and healthcare; and (3) locals perceive little in the way of dialectal variation in Zhouqu Tibetan, with only Boyu Village's speech variety being divergent to the point that it impacts intelligibility.

### KEYWORDS

EGIDS, Gansu, participatory methods, Tibetan dialects, Zhouqu Tibetan

## INTRODUCTION

Zhouqu<sup>1</sup> Tibetan is a Tibetic speech variety of China. It is spoken in the central and southern areas of Gansu Province's Zhouqu County, including Guoye, Baleng, Wuping, Chagang, Gongba, Qugaona, and Boyu. It is also quite possibly still spoken in Longnan City's Pingya Tibetan Village and Tielou Tibetan Village.<sup>2</sup> Zhouqu County covers an area of 3,010 square kilometers and lies between the Loess Plateau to the East and the Tibetan Plateau to the West. It has a population of 136,900 people of whom thirty-four percent (46,000) are officially registered as Tibetan.

Zhouqu Tibetan is reported to be a unique variety of Tibetan. Ethnologue classifies Zhouqu Tibetan as a dialect of Choni (ISO 639-3, identifier cda). The Ethnologue lists Choni as a Central Bodish language and does not directly cluster Choni with Amdo, Khams, or the Central varieties of Central Bodish. Tournadre (2014) also does not cluster Zhouqu Tibetan, or Choni, with Amdo, Khams, or Central Tibetan. Even though some other scholars cluster Choni and Zhouqu Tibetan as dialects of Khams, these two speech varieties are often given their own special dialect grouping within Khams, as is found in the *Language Atlas of China* (1988) and Zhang (1996). Despite the differences, all these clustering schemes suggest that Zhouqu Tibetan is a unique speech variety worthy of specific research. This is especially true given that there are reports of rapid Sinicization amongst Tibetans in Zhouqu (Suzuki 2015).

Suzuki (2015) suggests a provisional classification for the Tibetan Dialects found within Zhouqu County. He groups them into the Thewo group in the northwest and the mBrugchu group in the Southeast. These two groupings match the *Zhouqu County Gazette's* proposed dialectal groupings. Suzuki further divides the mBrugchu group, which he says is the authentic form of Zhouqu Tibetan, into two subgroups whose geographical distribution follows the old political

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<sup>1</sup> Except when referencing material that uses Tibetan Wylie, this paper uses Chinese Pinyin for all toponyms and dialect names.

<sup>2</sup> Local sources in Zhouqu report limited use of Zhouqu Tibetan amongst elderly people in these two locations. However, the authors as yet has not traveled to these places to confirm these reports.

boundaries between the areas traditionally controlled by the Princes of Choni and Tanchang. It is in the areas formerly controlled by the Princes of Choni where the research in this paper was primarily conducted.

The primary goal of this survey was to explore Zhouqu Tibetan's language vitality, the domains of its use, locals' attitudes toward this speech variety, and locals' perceptions of dialectal variation. Hence, this paper contributes a basic socio-linguistic sketch of Zhouqu Tibetan that will help to lay groundwork upon which future language documentation and linguistic research can be built. Also, given Suzuki's (2015) report, there is a need to explore how urgent Zhouqu Tibetan's language documentation needs are.

This survey seeks to answer the following four questions: (1) What is the vitality of Zhouqu Tibetan on the EGIDS scale? (2) In which language domains is Zhouqu Tibetan used? (3) What are local attitudes towards this speech variety? (4) What are local perceptions of dialectal differences within Zhouqu Tibetan?

## METHODOLOGY

In order to explore these four questions, the researcher used three participatory method tools developed by Hasselbring (2011) and sociolinguistic interviews of both a formal and informal nature. The three participatory methods tools were: (1) Overlapping Circles, a tool exploring bilingualism; (2) The Languages We Speak, a tool exploring what domains different languages are used in; and (3) the Dialect Mapping Tool that explores local perceptions of dialectical variation. Each of these tools can be thought of as a participatory, group interview whereby the facilitator asks open-ended questions and the participants are encouraged to discuss the answers with each other and collectively arrive at an answer.

Overlapping Circles begins with the facilitator asking the participant experts what languages are spoken and written where they live. The names of these languages are then written down and placed in a horizontal line where everyone can see them. After this, the facilitator asks what type of people speak or write these languages.

Answers might include groups like "students," "migrant workers," "civil servants," etc. These answers are written down and put under the corresponding language "column" created during the first question. The participants are then asked to use two strings to circle those people who: (1) speak/write the first language well, but lack a good grasp of the second language; (2) speak/write the second language well, but don't have a good grasp of the first language; and (3) speak/write both languages well. This third group is located where the strings overlap with each other, hence the tool's name.

The Languages We Speak also begins with listing what the local languages are and arranging them horizontally so that it is convenient for everyone to see. This is followed by asking in what situations the participants use each of the languages. These situations are written down and placed under the corresponding language. Next, they are ordered according to the frequency of these activities and the amount of time spent on them.

In the Dialect Mapping Tool, the participants are given pieces of paper and asked to write down all the places that use the same language (L1) as they do. Participants are then asked to arrange these pieces of paper in a way that roughly reflects their geographical proximity to each other. Questions are then asked about their frequency of travel to these places and how well they understand the speech varieties of each place listed.

A total of five villages were visited (see Table 1). All three of these tools were used in full at Gongba, Qugaona, and Boyu. In Wuping Village, only the Overlapping Circles Tool was used. In Chagang Village, we were only able to find two people to participate and used the questions from the tools to conduct a more traditional interview.

Table 1: Data Points and Demographics.<sup>1</sup>

Village Name	Population	Percentage of Tibetans	Percentage of Han Chinese
Wuping	5,983	51.50	48.50
Chagang	3,374	largely Tibetan, exact demographic split unknown	several Han Chinese Hamlets
Gongba	5,827	99.83	?
Qugaona	13,103	100.00	0.00
Boyu	5,432	95.00	5.00

RESULTS

The results from the participatory interviews are as follows:

- Zhouqu Tibetan is used vigorously in all language domains found within the geographic area of its use; it is the language of home and village life.
- The Zhouqu Tibetans have a high level of Chinese, which is developed first in school and then strengthened as they work as migrant workers in neighboring cities.
- Zhouqu Tibetan is not used when someone is present who does not understand this particular variety of Tibetan. This is likely to happen in government offices because not all of the civil servants working in the area are local Tibetans. It also happens when Han Chinese from the Han Chinese hamlets in Wuping and Chagang interact with Tibetans from neighboring hamlets. It was

<sup>1</sup> This data was obtained from Zhouqu County's government website: [http://www.zqx.gov.cn/nzcms\\_show\\_news.asp?id=10808](http://www.zqx.gov.cn/nzcms_show_news.asp?id=10808), accessed 1 May 2017.

mentioned, though, that some of the Han Chinese in these hamlets have learned to speak Zhouqu Tibetan.

- Parents, with few exceptions, do not speak Chinese with their children, who do not learn Chinese until they go to school. Many but not all middle-aged Tibetans speak Chinese. All young people who are at least in or above grades three and four speak Chinese. Many of the older generation, however, never learned.
- In the schools, teachers in the lower grades, especially grades one and two of elementary school, use both Tibetan and Chinese to explain the Chinese textbooks.
- In terms of population density, the majority of people are Tibetan in most of these villages, thus the common language for everyday communication is Tibetan. Many locals go to work in the big cities on a part time basis, but when they return to their villages, they are ridiculed if they speak Chinese. In certain villages gathering medicinal herbs in the mountains is the main source of income, those who go to the city to work only stay for a relatively short time - at most several months.
- When locals looked inward at their community, language attitudes were quite positive, reflecting how they view their language as part of their identity. Nevertheless, when looking beyond their community to the outside world, they acutely realize the importance of learning Chinese for better health care, education, and employment.
- Tibetans in these villages feel that their dialects are roughly the same and that they have no trouble communicating throughout this region. However, they do indicate that the variety of Zhouqu Tibetan spoken in Boyu is somewhat different and at times this difference impacts intelligibility.

Accordingly, it appears that Zhouqu Tibetan should be ranked either 6a, Vigorous, or 6b, Threatened, on the EGIDS scale. Paul Lewis and Gary Simons combined Joshua Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) with UNESCO's language vitality scale to create the Extended Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS). The combination gives numbered rankings between zero and ten. Level six and eight are further divided into an 'a' and 'b' level,

giving the final scale thirteen distinct rankings. EGIDS 6a, Vigorous, has the following five characteristics:

1. The oral language is used for every domain desired.
2. All children learn the vernacular in their homes (literacy, if any, however, is in the second language).
3. Speakers see many benefits in speaking their language, but do not see benefits in writing it.
4. The government allows the language to be spoken but does not allow the language to be developed.
5. Speakers share a common set of habits that determine when they use the vernacular and when they use the language of wider communication.

EGIDS 6b, Threatened, has a similar set of five characteristics:

1. The oral language is used for some of the domains desired.
2. Although the language is used amongst all generations orally, only some parents are using the language in the home with their children.
3. Many of the child-bearing generation only see benefit in using their language orally in some language domains while others see more benefit in switching to a more dominant language.
4. The government allows the language to be spoken, but does not allow the language to be developed.
5. Dominant languages are encroaching on domains which were traditionally reserved for the local language.

## DISCUSSION

We had only four days to make this trip, which is too short a time to do a thorough socio-linguistic survey. However, we witnessed a strong degree of continuity between the interviews, our observations, and the many discussions we had with drivers, inn keepers, farmers, teachers, and local business people. We were able to observe Zhouqu Tibetan language use in shops, in government offices, at a school, between family members, in homes, between children, and in the villages in

general. These observations confirm the reliability of what local participants related to us regarding language vitality, domains of language use, language attitudes, and local perceptions of dialectal differences.

Although the results seem to present a strong and healthy language situation, the fact remains that there are some instances of Chinese replacing Zhouqu Tibetan as the language of the home. There is also a local perception that Chinese is a critical skill for such fundamental domains as education, healthcare, and employment. We therefore include EGIDS 6b, Threatened, as a possible ranking for Zhouqu Tibetan. Most people we spoke to, including parents, knew of only relatively few examples of parents not passing on Zhouqu Tibetan to their children. However, given that this was completely unheard of in the previous generation, it is clear that a new trend has emerged. Because of these factors, we felt it important to include EGIDS 6b as a possible score for Zhouqu Tibetan.

The position of the Boyu speech variety of Zhouqu Tibetan is complicated by the fact that, although there are historical and geographical reasons to expect a difference, we are unsure if references to Boyu's aberrancy referred to Zhouqu Tibetan or Baima. Local perceptions of Zhouqu Tibetan's linguistic variation support Suzuki's (2015) preliminary dialectal classification, with the exception of Boyu. A possible explanation is found in Zhouta (1996), who writes that the Tibetans who inhabit Boyu came from an area stretching from Benzilan, Yunnan, in the south to Changdu, Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), in the north. This is not the original homeland of the first Tibetans to arrive in Zhouqu. Zhouta (1996) states that the first Tibetans to come to Zhouqu came from an area stretching from Shannan Region, TAR, in the west to the Gongbu Region, TAR, in the east. In addition, Boyu belongs to a different river valley than the other four villages of this study. A pass connects these two valleys. Reaching it requires (traveling west) climbing from 1,500 to 3,550 meters and then back down to 1,830 meters. This is a long climb over steep terrain. Although these two factors suggest that different linguistic origins and limited language contact might contribute to perceived differences, it is also possible that what is being referred to is the Baima language. Baima is spoken in several villages located within Boyu (Suzuki 2015).



We did ask participants if they were referring to Baima or Zhouqu Tibetan when they spoke of the Boyu speech variety's aberrancy. They responded negatively, but given our short time in the research area, we were unable to corroborate their evaluation. In Boyu itself, our research consultants were all natives of Jiyenuo, a non-Baima village of Boyu.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the high level of bilingualism present among the Zhouqu Tibetans, Zhouqu Tibetan is used in all language domains found within the local area. It is likely to be 6a Vigorous or 6b Threatened on the EGIDS scale. Local language attitudes are positive in general, but there is recognition that economic stability, healthcare, and education all require proficiency in Mandarin Chinese. Overall, it appears that in Zhouqu County, which is represented in this study, language vitality is stronger than Suzuki (2015) suggests. There appears to be little dialectal variation between the villages of Wuping, Chagang, Gongba, and Qugaona. The village of Boyu is reported by locals to be somewhat different, and this difference is significant enough to affect intelligibility.

FIG 1. Zhouqu's location in China (Google Earth, 2016; Gansu Province Atlas, 2000).

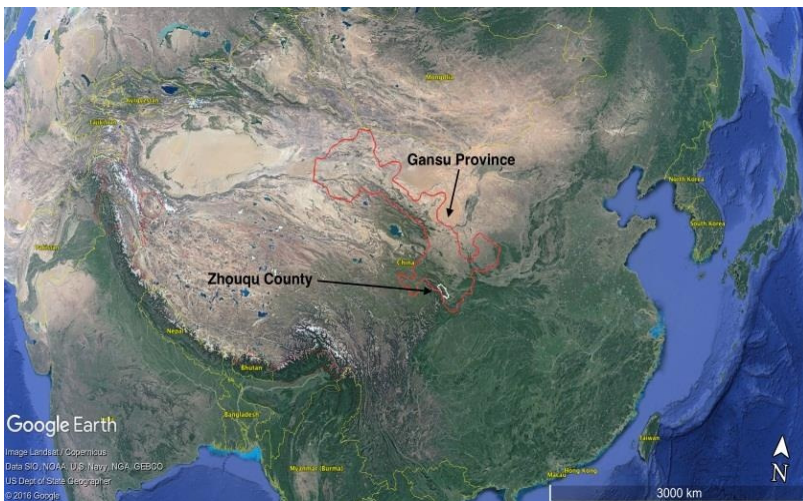


FIG 2. The Research Area (Google Earth, 2016; Gansu Province Atlas, 2000).

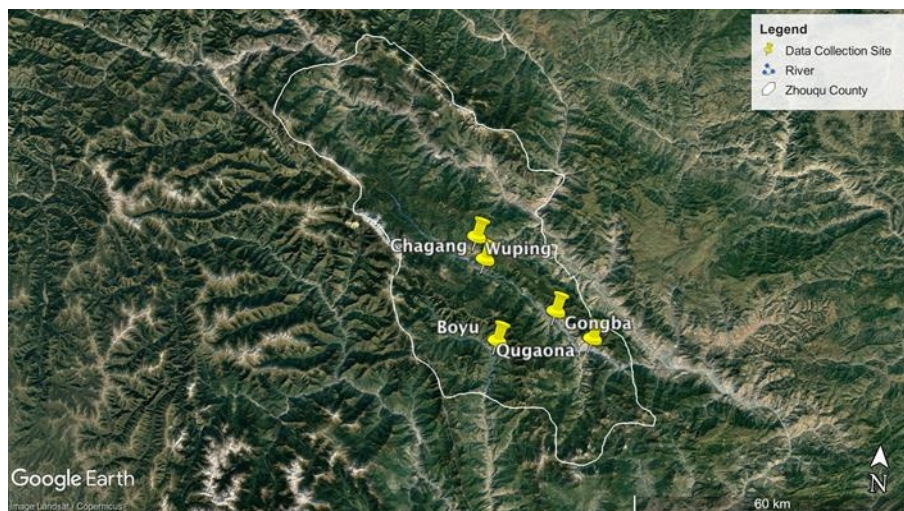


FIG 3. A hamlet belonging to Chagang Village (Abe Powell, 2015).



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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Baima 白马

Baleng 八楞

Benzilan 奔子栏

Boyu 博峪

Chagang 插岗

Changdu 昌都

China 中国

Choni 卓尼

Gansu 甘肃

Gongba 拱坝

Gongbu 工布

Guoye 果耶

Jiyenuo 吉也诺

Longnan 陇南

Pingya 坪坝

Qugaona 曲告纳

Shannan 山南

Tanchang 宕昌

Thewo 迭部

Tibet Autonomous Region, Xizang zhizhiqu 西藏自治区

Tielou 铁楼

Wuping 武坪

Yunnan 云南

Zhouqu 舟曲